Tomb Guards Gather to Honor the Unknown and Their Shared History

December 7, 2025 **by Dan McCue**

A tomb guard, also called a Sentinel, at the Tomb of the Unknown Soldier in Arlington National Cemetery. (Photo by Dan McCue)

WASHINGTON — The sentinel came to a stop near the end of the long black mat.

Motionless, seeming not even to draw a breath, autumn leaves reflected in the sunglasses that rested upon his solemn cheeks above a firmly set jaw.

A mere 10 feet away, a dozen or so tourists watched and snapped cellphone photos from behind a linked chain.

It was only when the soldier reached a silent count of 21 that he made any move at all.

When he did, it was to pivot a quarter turn on the balls of his immaculately shined shoes.

With that, he faced the tomb and the silent counting to 21, an allusion to a twenty-one gun salute, the highest honor given a military or foreign dignitary, began all over again.

The crowd, rather than growing restive, stood and marveled at the young soldier's discipline.

And they waited, patiently, for what they knew would be the next move in a carefully choreographed ritual that has been going on 24-hours a day, 365 days a year since April 6, 1948.

For many of the estimated 4 million people who visit Arlington National Cemetery annually to pay their last respects to loved ones or simply to walk the historic grounds, a reflective stop at the Tomb of the Unknown Soldier is almost mandatory.

After the Eternal Flame at the grave of President John F. Kennedy, it is no doubt the most visited historic site in all of the cemetery, well ahead of Arlington House, the McClellan Gate, the Space Shuttle Challenger Memorial or the grave of Supreme Court Justice Ruth Bader Ginsburg.

Every two years, however, just before Veterans' Day, a very different group of onlookers joins the typical tourists in the crowd.

Bolt straight and in most cases, nearly as fit as they were in the service days, the tomb guards, members of the Society of the Honor Guard, don't consciously draw attention to themselves.

Typically, it's only after someone overhears a hushed comment about the drill that they'll turn and be asked, "Did you used to do this?"

With that, a former tomb guard — though "former" is a term one applies loosely to this tight fraternity — is often happy to oblige a respectful question or two, so long as they don't distract from the scene before them.

On the Friday afternoon before the Society's ball and Sunday morning gathering at the tomb, those questions were answered by Herb Smith; a resident of Conyers, Georgia, who was a sentinel at the tomb from March 1968 until his discharge from the U.S. Army in April 1969.

Over lunch at the Hyatt Regency Crystal City, about five miles from the tomb, Smith offered a window into a very different time and much military, or Washington, D.C., history.

The tradition of honoring an unknown warrior from among a nation's war dead began in Great Britain and France in the immediate aftermath of World War I, but it took nearly two years before the United States took similar steps.

Though in October 1919, the proposal crossed the desk of Gen. Peyton March, the Army chief of staff at the time, he rejected it out of hand, believing the Army Graves Registration Service eventually would identify all American dead.

In addition, Peyton said, even if a soldier's remains could not be identified, there was no burial place to honor such a hero in the U.S. that compared to Westminster Abbey or the Arc de Triomphe.

It was Rep. Hamilton Fish III, R-N.Y., who finally settled the matter, introducing legislation calling for the return of an unknown American killed while serving in the American Expeditionary Forces in France and his burial at Arlington National Cemetery.

President Woodrow Wilson signed the resolution into law in March 1921, directing that an appropriate tomb be constructed on the east

plaza of Arlington's Memorial Amphitheater.

A tomb guard prepared to take his next 21 steps across the mat. (Photo by Dan McCue)

The unknown soldier from World War I finally arrived at the site for burial on Nov. 11, 1921, but it took even longer for the full-blown watch over the tomb to come to pass.

It wasn't until late 1925 that a civilian watchman was posted at the tomb — and then, only during the hours the cemetery was open to the public — and it would be another six months before the civilian watchman was replaced by an actual military guard.

Those guard shifts were modified to 24-hours a day on July 2,1937; Smith arrived through some bit of a happenstance 31 years later.

Having grown up in Conyers, a small town just outside of Atlanta, Smith briefly attended a private college before transferring to Georgia State University.

The year was 1966, a time when the Vietnam War was rapidly escalating as the United States significantly increased its troop presence and a number of large-scale offensive operations were launched.

By the end of the year, the number of U.S. troops on the ground in Vietnam topped 360,000, and the United States' strategy had

shifted toward combating regular North Vietnamese forces in addition to counterinsurgency operations.

Back home, Smith decided to transfer between schools because he was finding attending a private school far too expensive.

But transferring from one college to another was a risky proposition in the mid-1960s, with the military draft on.

While college enrollment increased significantly during the era because a college deferment allowed men to postpone or avoid the draft, in transferring one had to make sure there was no gap in their studies and that they were still enrolled in what the government deemed a qualifying program.

Long story short, failing to do either of those things or to meet the academic requirements for deferment at the new institution, made one instantly eligible for the draft.

“I lost my deferment after transferring, and when I was about halfway through my sophomore year, I got a message that said I needed to take a physical,” Smith said as his fork hovered over a chicken salad.

“A month later, I received another letter that said, ‘Show up at the draft board at 6 a.m. on such and such a date,’” he added.

Smith showed up on the appointed day, but didn’t hear his name called. Puzzled, he asked what had happened and discovered that the woman who ran the local draft board had granted him deferment without his knowledge.

“I didn’t know her personally, but my parents knew her and I guess she thought she was being kind and doing them a favor, but I, politely as I could, said, no thank you,” he recalled.

"I mean, I had done all this stuff in anticipation of being drafted and being sent off to Vietnam. I was mentally prepared, and I seriously thought, 'Well, if I'm going to get killed, it's better to get killed having paid for just two years of college, rather than four …'"

Smith laughed.

"So I had her put me back on the list and the next thing I knew I was on my way to Fort Benning, Georgia, for basic training," he said.

Herb Smith, walking the mat after an early morning snow storm in the winter of 1968.

By now, it was the spring of 1967. The Beatles' "Sgt. Pepper's Lonely Hearts Club Band" would be released just days before his graduation from boot camp; the so-called "Summer of Love" in San Francisco would blossom shortly afterwards.

From Fort Benning, Smith was steered toward Officer Candidate School, with a stop at Fort Lewis, now Joint Base Lewis–McChord, outside Tacoma, Washington.

"What you have to remember about this time is that most of the young men who were drafted had little more than a high school education," Smith said. "When we graduated from basic training,

about 90% of those I'd trained with were sent to 'Tigerland,' the U.S. Army training facility at Fort Polk, Louisiana."

Today the name "Tigerland" is considered an homage at Fort Polk to all the brave soldiers who passed through it; between 1962 and 1973. During those years its hot and swampy conditions were used to prepare young men for the climate of Vietnam.

"I arrived at Fort Lewis in early June, 1967, at the exact moment when the Six-Day War began between Israel and a coalition of Arab states," Smith said. "Of course, they now told us we'd be going to the Middle East, which upset a lot of the guys.

"My attitude was, 'Good. At least you can see people coming at you in the desert.'"

As it happened, the soldiers in training never did get sent to the Middle East.

But in the meantime, Smith was told his upcoming Officer Candidate School class had been cancelled.

"At that point, I had a couple of options," he said. "I could apply to attend the next Officer Candidate School Class and stay in line for that, or I could consider a few other possible assignments.

"Because I'd worked in a warehouse while in school, I applied to be a quartermaster, but didn't get it. I then applied for artillery, got it, but a week later, they canceled that training class," he added.

Looming before Smith was being deemed eligible for "worldwide assignment," which by then had become a euphemism for being sent straight to Vietnam.

There was one other choice — take the test to qualify for flight school.

After passing the test, Smith was sent to Fort Myer — now Joint Base Myer–Henderson Hall — a U.S. Army post located next to Arlington National Cemetery in Virginia.

It was an assignment that would shape the rest of his life.

With his focus being on his impending admission to flight school, Smith initially paid little attention to the fact the top company at the base was the elite 3rd U.S. Infantry Regiment, the Honor Guard company, the highest duty of which was to stand watch at the Tomb of the Unknown Soldier.

Everybody who arrived at Fort Myer was considered a potential member of the regiment. Being selected for the honor, however, was not easy.

First, you had to be in excellent physical condition, and stand between 5'10" and 6'4".

(Later, when women joined the guard, their height specifications were between 5'8" and 6'2".)

One also had to have an unblemished military record.

"Basically, you arrived at Fort Myer and underwent an interview and then an initial training period, where you trained [in rifle drills], the 'manual of arms' and had to memorize several pages of Arlington National Cemetery history, which you had to be able to recite verbatim," Smith said.

The "manual of arms" is a set of instructions for handling weapons — both in terms of the sequence of actions needed to operate a specific firearm and drills like "port arms" and "order arms" for close-order drill.

It also includes all steps for safely making a firearm ready to fire or returning it to a safe condition.

Smith was one of 12 young men in that training class. Four days later, when evaluations and cuts were made, he was the only one of the 12 to be selected to move on to the next stage of honor guard training.

A moment from the change of guards ceremony.

(Photo by Dan McCue)

"I was fortunate," he said, still humbled by the experience decades later. "With that, they assigned me to the U.S. Army drill team."

About a month later, by which time he'd become an old hand at "throwing the rifles around," his squad leader approached him and said he needed to go and retrieve a rifle from the quartermaster.

"'Go down and bring it back up,' he said. "So I started down the stairs and he said, 'No, don't go down the stairs, walk through the quadrangle.'"

Smith quickly explained that the conversation took place in one of the base's old U-shape buildings, historic structures that can still be seen today from a motorist passing on Route 50.

Traversing the quadrangle took one past an equally historic row of large officer residences.

"So, I started walking through the quadrangle and I noticed a guy watching me from the second floor of one of these buildings," he

said. “I didn’t think anything of it, really, but the next day they asked if I wanted to volunteer for duty at the tomb.”

While Sentinels, as the tomb guards are known, volunteer for the post, being given the chance to volunteer is a high honor, a chance to become a member of an elite corps, Company E of “The Old Guard.”

Further training followed, including learning the crucial guard-change ceremony and the grave locations of nearly 300 veterans. Smith, like all sentinels before and since, was steeped in the methods and practices for keeping his uniform and weapons in immaculate condition.

He’d be a member of the tomb guard from September 1967 until April 1969, although the reality is that once a member of this rarefied group, one never truly leaves “the watch,” as the constant vigil at the Tomb of the Unknown Soldier is known.

Brushes With National Tragedy

Like all Sentinel’s, Smith performed other duties at the cemetery as he prepared for his role in the ritual of walking the mat, performed in all weather conditions, to ensure the unidentified service members buried in the tomb receive perpetual respect and honor.

For Smith, one of these duties entailed standing guard at the then newly-opened President John F. Kennedy gravesite memorial.

On Nov. 25, 1963, three days after he was slain in Dallas, the president was interred in a 20’x 30’ plot on an axis line between Arlington House. at the top of the sloping hill overlooking the cemetery, and the Lincoln Memorial.

The gravesite, surrounded by a white picket fence and marked by a simple white cross, soon became a major tourist destination.

During the first year after the assasination, an estimated 3,000 people per hour visited the grave on weekdays, the number swelling considerably on weekends.

The Eternal Flame at the gravesite of President John f. Kennedy. (Photo by Dan McCue)

By the time Smith arrived at Fort Myer, it was estimated that 16 million people had visited the gravesite.

The crush of mourners, however, had long been a source of concern. In the weeks after the president's original burial, cemetery officials and the Kennedy family agreed a more accessible memorial should be built.

Kennedy's body was reinterred in what is now his permanent grave at Arlington National Cemetery on the evening of March 14, 1967, after the cemetery had closed for the night.

The exhumation began at roughly 6:20 p.m, with a small crane used to lift the burial vault from the old grave to the new one, and was completed roughly three hours later, as his brothers, Sens. Robert F. Kennedy and Ted Kennedy, and Cardinal Richard Cushing of Boston looked on.

As was the case with Kennedy's initial burial, former First Lady Jacqueline Kennedy chose the location for the permanent memorial, which was about 20' from her husband's initial burial site.

The new grave was consecrated early the following morning in a driving rain, after which the memorial was opened with little in the way of fanfare.

That October, Smith was assigned to the gravesite.

“Training to be a tomb guard is quite intense,” he said. “By comparison, what I did at the Kennedy gravesite was kind of … pedestrian control.

“The crowds could be pretty large, but it was a cush job compared to standing watch at the tomb,” he said.

Then as now, tomb guards worked on a three-relief rotation; each relief had one commander, and in Smith’s day, each relief had three sentinels assigned under him.

“Back then we’d work 24 hours and then be off 48 hours; today, they have more sentinels — about six — assigned to each relief, and they work more of a fireman schedule: 24 hours on, 24 hours off, 24 hours on, 24 hours off, 24 hours on, then 96 hours off,” he explained.

But time off isn’t exactly time off. It takes the average Sentinel about eight hours to prepare their uniform for their next work day.

And then there are the daily demands of physical training and keeping up with their military education.

Like Smith, sentinels are typically young – 22 on average in 2025 – and hold the rank of private first class through specialist.

The three reliefs are organized by height, so that those in each guard change ceremony look similar in appearance.

The sentinels wear the Army dress blue uniform, reminiscent of the color and style worn by soldiers during the late 1800s.

If Smith's duties at the JFK gravesite were rather benign, he had a markedly different experience eight months later, on the day of Sen. Robert Kennedy's burial.

This bugle was used by Army Sergeant Keith Clark to play "Taps" at the burial of President John F. Kennedy on November 25, 1963.

The bugle played during the burial ceremony for President Kennedy. (Photo by Dan McCue)

When Kennedy's 21-car funeral train left Penn Station in New York City at 1:07 p.m., Smith, part of the second relief that day, was on duty at the tomb.

A short distance away, the area around Arlington's second Kennedy grave was being prepared for his arrival, with the day's third relief of tomb guards being assigned to participate in the funeral.

The day, however, became much longer than anyone anticipated.

Though the rail trip between New York and Washington was expected to take four hours, it actually took eight, due largely to the thousands of ordinary citizens who gathered to pay their last respects along the route.

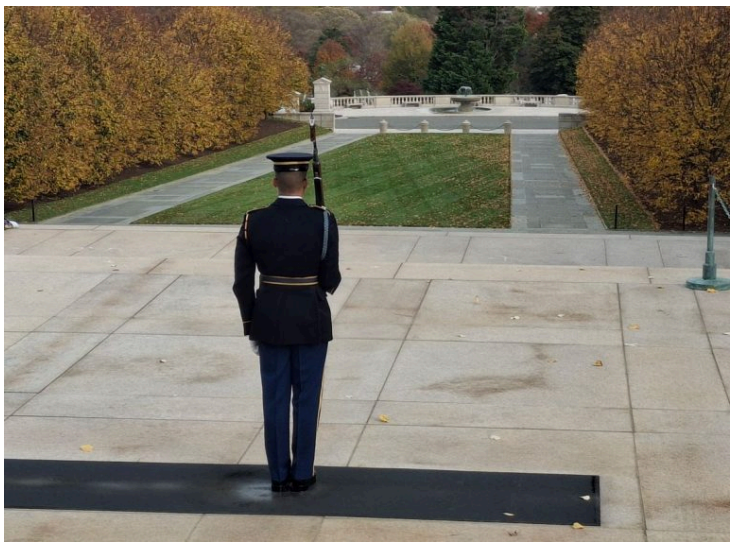
The somber procession grew even more grim after a crowd of onlookers was hit by another train near Elizabeth, New Jersey. Two people died at the scene, while four others were seriously injured.

Late that afternoon, Smith was walking the mat when he saw a strange, gesturing figure approaching in the distance.

“I was on the north end of the mat, facing east, and he was downhill from the tomb, standing between the fountain one can still see in the distance, and then chain separating the lawn there from the road,” he said.

“I don’t recall exactly what he was doing, but I can tell you it looked strange from my vantage point,” Smith recalled.

He then proceeded to the south end of the mat and once again fixed his eyes on the man, “who was still doing weird things.”



A tomb guard looks down the expanse where Herb Smith encountered the deranged visitor the day of Sen. Robert F. Kennedy’s funeral. (Photo by Dan McCue)

“The next thing I knew he had come over the chain and headed right up the steps toward the tomb,” Smith said.

The man was wearing a waist-length “Eisenhower” jacket, a uniform element named for the supreme commander of the Allied Expeditionary Force and future president during the later stage of World War II.

Smith followed the procedure in which all tomb guards are trained for such circumstances.

He lowered his rifle to "port arms," the military drill position in which the rifle is held diagonally across the chest, with the muzzle to the left and ready for use.

"We have three or four speeches we're prepared to give, depending on the circumstances," he said.

Smith began one of them, effectively ordering the man to stop, his hands gripping his rifle for the utmost stability.

The man responded by shouting that he had to get a message to President Woodrow Wilson, who had died in 1924.

"I've got to get to the president," he repeated.

"I remember thinking he was some 50 years too late," said Smith. "He ran off after I continued to reprimand him. The MPs found him later in another part of the cemetery."

"That's the strangest thing that ever happened to me on a watch," he said.

As this scene transpired, the third relief, consisting of Sentinels Barry Wilson, John Dawson, and Bill Stevens, continued waiting for the Kennedy burial party.

By the time it finally did arrive, Wilson vividly remembered in a recent Facebook post, "it was well into the night."

"After the family pallbearers placed Mr. Kennedy's casket on the gurney over the gravesite, we marched up, circled immediately around the casket, and remained there throughout the extended burial ceremonies," he wrote.

Following the solemn ceremony, the relief remained in place until the massive crowd that had gathered at the gravesite had dispersed.

The final resting place of President John F. Kennedy, First Lady Jacqueline Kennedy Onassis, and their two children who died in infancy. (photo by Dan McCue)

"At that time we lowered the casket into the ground and turned the rest of the burial over to the cemetery workers," Wilson remembered

"It was a very long day. It was sad … and yet satisfying; we were honored to be able to have a small but significant place in a historical event," he added.

The following evening he, Dawson and Stevens were back on their regular duty at the tomb, when a call came in from headquarters.

Wilson was to open the cemetery gate — it was after closing hours — and he was to escort Ethel Kennedy, the senators' widow, from the gate to the gravesite.

"I did, and then once we were at the grave, I let her have some private time," he said.

"She was a nice lady," Wilson recalled, "A few weeks later I received a handwritten note from Mrs. Kennedy, thanking me for my

assistance with the burial and later, at the cemetery. I still have that note," Wison said.

Being a member of the elite Tomb Guard, however, was no guarantee that one wouldn't be called upon to go Vietnam.

By the summer of 1968, 535,000 American military forces were on the ground there.

In October 1968, Smith and two of his fellow tomb guards, James Moffat and Spencer Williams, received their orders and were told to prepare to go.

To this day he believes it was Gen. William Westmoreland himself, the man who had served as commander of U.S. forces in Vietnam from 1964 to 1968, who may have personally intervened on their behalf.

"That summer, President Johnson had appointed Westmoreland to serve as chief of staff of the Army at the Pentagon, and he would come through the cemetery occasionally to get to his quarters at Fort Myers," he explained.

"Well, on this particular afternoon, he stopped by the tomb guard quarters, which are located underneath the memorial amphitheater adjacent to the tomb," Smith said.

"I was standing right at the entrance, and of course, when I saw an officer coming in, I yelled,'attention!'"

Westmoreland smiled.

"No, no," he said, encouraging the guards to remain at ease.

With that, the general, then a polarizing individual on the American scene, shook each of their hands and began to engage them in small talk.

“He was pretty cool, friendly, and so I introduced myself, telling him my rank was specialist, and he said, ‘Well, specialists, what’s going on?’ And I said, ‘Well, not much, but the three of us just got orders for Vietnam.’”

The graves of Robert F. Kennedy and his wife, Ethel Kennedy. (Photo by Dan McCue)

He said, “Well, how many are you?” I said, “Twelve in all.”

Westmoreland’s brow furrowed.

“They can’t do that,” he said.

The guards and Westmoreland made some more small talk and then the general turned to leave.

The next morning Smith and Spencer learned their orders had been canceled. Moffat, by virtue of his name coming earlier in the alphabet, did have to go for some training in preparation for his reassignment to Vietnam, but two weeks later, his orders were canceled as well.

“So none of us had to go. Now, I don’t know that I would have had to go anyway, since by that point, I only had eight months left in the service, but you never know,” he said.

Instead, by the time he was discharged, Smith got married and the couples' first daughter was on the way.

A Visit to the Guard's Quarters

Smith's mention of tomb guard quarters still hung in the air.

What was it like, he was asked.

"Well, when you're on duty, that's your living quarters," he said.

"And that's where you get prepared to do your thing," he continued before adding, "I can take you there, if you'd like."

On the drive over to the cemetery, Smith reeled off a series of historical anecdotes about the cemetery and the guard.

Inside the tomb guard's world. (Photo by Dan McCue)

"I always wanted to be an historian," he said.

"You know, when I was a tomb guard and frequenting these quarters, they used to tell us Abraham Lincoln's catafalque, the platform used to support his casket while he lay in state in the Capitol Rotunda, was still there.

"And I think it was true," he said.

In fact, records show that the coffins for the unknowns of both World War II and the Korean War both rested at some point on the

Lincoln catafalque; today, though still used on occasion, it is kept in a specially constructed display area in the U.S. Capitol Visitor Center's Exhibition Hall.

After parking near the grave of Audie Murphy, the most decorated American combat soldier of World War II, and walking a few yards to the amphitheater, Smith stopped to observe a current guard in action.

Glancing at his watch, Smith mentioned it was near the end of the guard's shift. Tourists had already assembled to watch the highly anticipated changing of the guard ceremony.

"To me it wasn't tough, but a lot of people over the years have had problems with their knees and their ankles," he said, speaking in a hushed respectful tone.

The dressing area.

"Those shoes probably weigh three-and-a-half pounds," he said, making a gesture toward them with his chin.

Though the footwear consists of standard issue military dress shoes, they are built up so the sole and heel are equal in height.

This allows the Sentinel to stand with a straight back and perpendicular to the ground.

As a result of the design the hat and bayonet of a sentinel never appear to bob up and down as they walk.

The soles have a steel tip on the toe and a "horseshoe" steel plate on the heel.

This prevents wear on the sole and allows the sentinel to move smoothly during his movements when he turns to face the Tomb and then back down the mat.

Finally, there's a "clicker," a shank of steel, that is attached to the inside face of each heel, a holdover from the days when Fort Myer was home to the Army cavalry, and something that gives each movement a distinct, impressive sound, particularly during a guard change, when multiple heels "click" in unison.

Smith then allowed that timing each movement to 21 seconds "is probably the most difficult thing out there."

"Some people never quite got it right, and almost everybody had a different way of doing it," he said.

"Gosh, I can't remember what the song was, but some of them had a song they sang in their heads to time out the 21 seconds," he said. "Me, I just stuck with counting 1000, 1001, 1002 and so on, and even today, I can probably still come really close to hitting the 21-second mark on the nose."

Before turning to go inside the tomb guard quarters, Smith mentioned that a side benefit of the way the soles are built up is "they keep the heat and cold of the plaza, depending on the weather, from being too hard on your feet."

"It could get brutally cold out here at night," he said

That begged a question tomb guards past and present are asked more often than any other: Is it spooky to guard the tomb in the

middle of the night?

"I don't recall it ever being all that bad, though once in a while someone might say they saw a ghost," he said. "Me, I don't know. I'm not a believer in ghosts.

Final adjustments. (Photo by Dan McCue)

"I've never seen a ghost or an alien or Bigfoot," he shrugged. "I'm hoping I someday get to see them all together, at once, so I can say, 'Okay, all done. I'm done.'"

Immediately inside the door of the tomb guard quarters is a vestibule that can best be described as a small den, with plaques and a few modest displays illustrating the guards and the tomb's history.

Many might be surprised to learn, for instance, that when the first unknown was buried at Arlington the "tomb" was inset into the flat surface of the plaza, a bit of geography with a view that inspired some cemetery visitors to actually picnic on it.

It wasn't until April 1932, when a newly designed Tomb of the Unknown Soldier — the tomb as seen today, topped by a 79-ton

sarcophagus — was completed and unveiled to the public.

Another significant display is dedicated to the story of Michael Blassie, an Air Force officer who was killed in action in Vietnam in May 1972 and interred as Vietnam's unknown soldier on Memorial Day in 1984.

A guard explains the secret of the special "click" to their shoes. (Photo by Dan McCue)

Blassie is the only unknown soldier ever subsequently identified and his remains were later reinterred at a military cemetery in St. Louis.

"He never should have been classified as unknown," Smith said, explaining that when his remains were found, months after he'd been shot down, the patrol that came upon the site of his crash found his ID card, dog tags and a wallet containing a family picture.

"Somewhere along the lines, someone concluded the age and height of the remains did not match those of Blassie, and he was reclassified as unknown," he continued.

"It was only after the science of DNA testing really came into its own, that he was properly identified, in 1998," he added.

Today, the so-called “Vietnam crypt” at the Tomb of the Unknown Soldier remains empty.

Beyond the entry chamber, there are few offices for commanding officers within the quarters proper, a dining area, kitchen and a dressing area defined by wooden shelves and a number of full length mirrors.

Here, appearance is discipline, down to the finest detail and subject to inspection.

One of the biggest preoccupations is the shoes, which at least two guards were then in the process of polishing.

“You’re always getting ready for the next workout,” said a guard who identified himself as Jamie, pointing to the activity around the room. “You can never take a break.”

Showing off the shine of a recently polished pair of shoes, he recalled a visit to the quarters by a family that happened to have a precocious young girl with them.

“She said, ‘look how shiny these are,’” he said. “Then she rubbed her hand across them.”

He sighed.

“‘I guess I’ll polish these again,’” he said he told her.

Getting ready for the guard change. (Photo by Dan McCue)

Nearby as he spoke, another

tomb guard was nearly ready for his shift.

As he prepared to go outside, he checked his appearance in one of the mirrors, meticulously taking in every detail from head to toe.

The final touch was pulling on a pair white gloves, and then, unexpectedly, picking up a spray bottle and liberally dousing his gloves with water.

“We moisten them to improve our grip on the rifle,” he explained.

With that, the tomb guard once again stood before the mirror. Above his head hung a gold bell.

“Oh that, that’s a new addition,” Jamie explained.

“It’s a quarter bell. It has no real significance here, but I’ve heard that there’s a tradition at Navy SEAL school that when somebody quits, they have to ring a bell like this one — and of course, nobody ever wants to ring that bell.

“So kind of in keeping with that tradition of excellence, we hung our bell up three months or so ago,” he said.

“Of course, there’s more to the story,” he said.

According to Jamie, it wasn’t long after the bell was hung that a former tomb guard who had served in the 1980s visited the quarters.

The gravesite Herb Smith never fails to visit.

(Photo by Dan McCue)

"He said, 'Oh, the bell is back?' I said, 'What do you mean?' he said, 'When I was here, there was a bell just like that … and in the exact same spot!'"

"All I could say was, 'All Tomb guards think alike," Jamie said with a laugh. "Every tomb guard that thinks they've created something is really doing something a tomb guard before him did long ago."

After leaving the guard quarters, Smith walked quickly in the direction of his SUV, but turned off abruptly and headed to a large gray tombstone 30' or so inside a neighboring section of graves.

"Whenever I come here, I come to pay respects," he said.

Smith then explained that the burial of the 16 men who bore the names etched on the stone was the first official funeral he played a role in after becoming a tomb guard.

The men had been killed in a helicopter crash in Vietnam on Oct. 8. 1967.

"I can still remember walking up here the day of the funeral," he said as wind picked up, somehow adding even more of a sorrowful air to his recollection.

"Because there were so many — they decided to bury the remains of the guys in four caskets," he said.

"A few of the guys were slightly older, but most of these fellows were my age," he said.

Two days after the visit to the tomb guard's quarters Smith and about three dozen other members of the Society of the Honor Guard assembled at the tomb for a wreath ceremony.

The Society of the Honor Guard Wreath. (Photo by Dan McCue)

The sky was gray and threatening rain, but a sizable crowd had gathered as the sentinel on duty walked the 21 steps across the mat, turned and faced the Tomb for 21 seconds, then turned to face back down the mat, while moving his rifle to his outside shoulder. (There is no "about-face" in their sentinel's routine.)

Twenty-one seconds later, the sentinel stepped off for another 21-step walk down the mat.

He'd repeated the process twice more, before the much anticipated guard change began.

The ceremony, which occurs every 30 minutes in the summer and every hour in the winter, is a precise ritual in which one sentinel is relieved by another.

On this morning, a female relief commander and the relieving sentinel quietly emerged from the underground quarters.

"Ladies and gentlemen, may I have your attention please," she said in a loud, clear voice that echoed off the marble.

"The ceremony that you are about to witness is the changing of the guard. In keeping with the dignity of this ceremony, it is requested

that everyone remain silent and standing," she said.

Several of the men in the viewing area removed their caps.

With that, the new sentinel unlocked his rifle bolt, signaling the start of the change.

Years removed from their service, former Tomb Guards pay their respects. (Photo by Dan McCue)

The relief commander performed a detailed, white-glove inspection of the weapon, and after signalling her approval, all three engaged in 21-step march, all three stopping, in unison, to face and salute the unknown soldiers.

The new sentinel then marched 21 steps down the black mat, turned, faced east for 21 seconds, turned, faced north for 21 seconds, then marched back.

With that, the wreath ceremony got under way.

While most who arrange to leave a wreath at the tomb do only that, the tomb guards also participated in a ceremonial laying down of roses to honor the courage and sacrifice of the unknown dead as well as the members of their own ranks who have gone on to what the group solemnly calls "their last watch."

As a lone bugler played taps, the guards, ranging from middle age to 96, walked from the right side of the grounds, and proceeded, parallel to the mat, to the spot where the wreath stood before the tomb.

Each bent or knelt to lay a rose on the mat. They then stood tall, facing the massive white marble sarcophagus they'd spent so much time honoring and protecting.

Most saluted, though a few chose to place their right hands over their hearts.

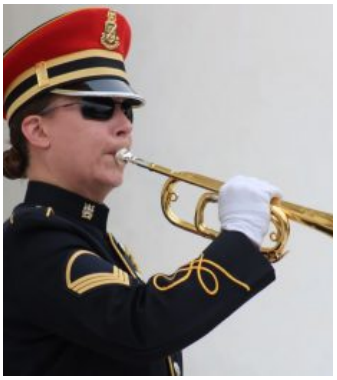
As it had in the days when each of them had done their duty at the tomb, the huge block still bore the neoclassical reliefs of the figures of Peace, Victory, and Valor, and the carved wreaths, symbolizing the sacrifices of unidentified American service members from World War I, World War II and the Korean War.

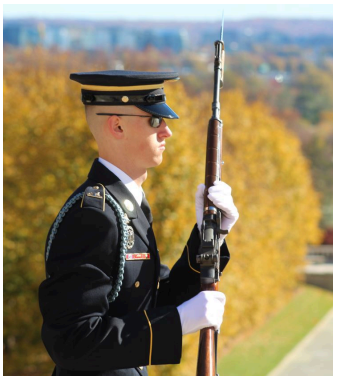
Several eyes glistened as they silently read the words, "Here rest in honored glory An American Soldier known but to God."

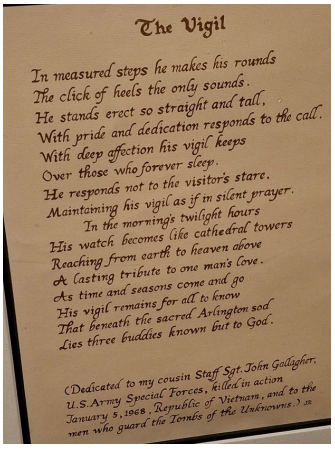
(*Photos in the gallery by Dan McCue, with the exemption of historical photos of Herb Smith during his last guard change in April 1969.*)

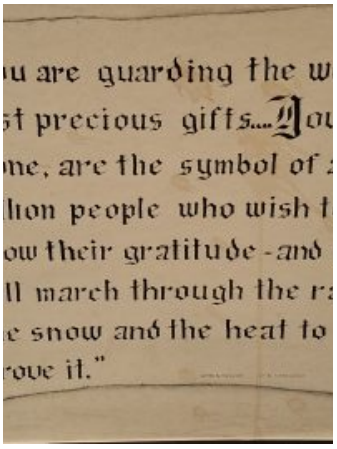
WELCOME TO
ARLINGTON NATIONAL CEMETERY
OUR NATION'S MOST SACRED SHRINE
PLEASE CONDUCT YOURSELF WITH QUIET DIGNITY AND RESPECT AT ALL TIMES
REMEMBER THESE ARE HALLOWED GROUNDS

HONOR
GUARD






The Vigil
In measured steps he makes his rounds
The click of heels the only sounds.
He stands erect so straight and tall,
With pride and dedication responds to the call.
With deep affection his vigil keeps
Over those who forever sleep.
He responds not to the visitor's stare.
Maintaining his vigil as if in silent prayer.
In the morning's twilight hours
His watch becomes like cathedral towers
Reaching from earth to heaven above
A lasting tribute to one man's love.
As time and seasons come and go
His vigil remains for all to know
That beneath the sacred Arlington sod
Lies three buddies known but to God.
(Dedicated to my cousin Staff Sgt. John Gallagher,
U.S. Army Special Forces, killed in action
January 5, 1968, Republic of Vietnam, and to the
men who guard the Tombs of the Unknowns.)


u are guarding the w
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ll march through the
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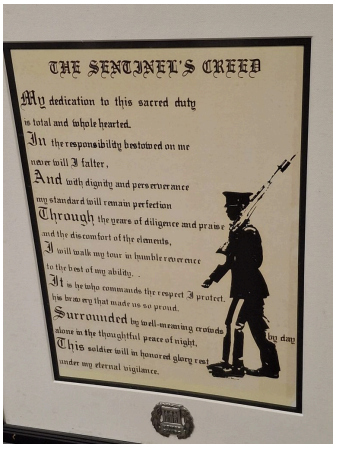
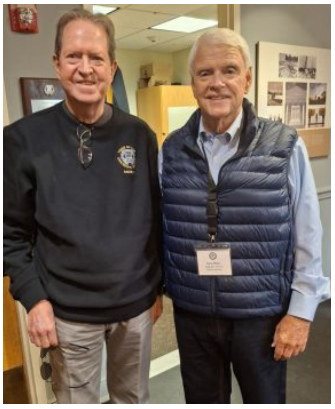
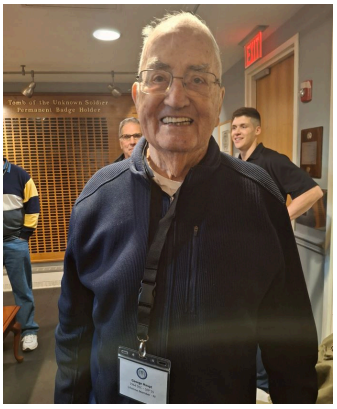
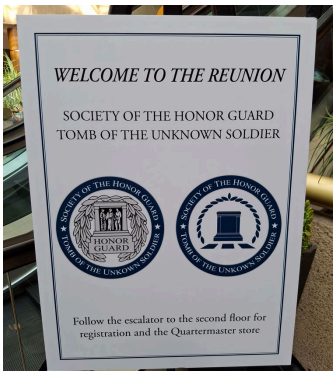
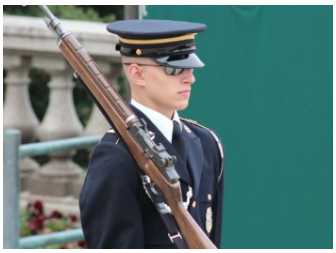
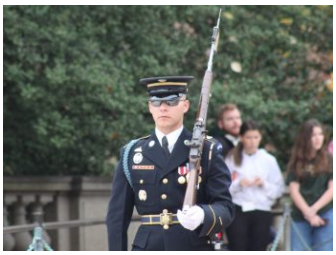

THE SENTINEL'S CREED
My dedication to this sacred duty
is total and whole hearted.
In the responsibility bestowed on me
never will I falter.
And with dignity and perseverance
my standard will remain perfection
Through the years of diligence and praise
and the discomfort of the elements,
I will walk my hour in humble reverence
to the best of my ability.
It is he who commands the respect I protect.
It is by me that made me so proud.
Surrounded by well-meaning crowds
alone in the thoughtful peace of night,
This soldier will in honored glory rest
under my eternal vigilance.




EXIT

E PLURIBUS UNUM

MICHAEL
JOSEPH
BLASSIE
US AIR FORCE
VIETNAM


WELCOME TO THE REUNION
SOCIETY OF THE HONOR GUARD
TOMB OF THE UNKNOWN SOLDIER
Follow the escalator to the second floor for registration and the Quartermaster store